



Educating Trail Users –Advice for Planning Interpretive Trail Signs and Exhibits

Laura Westrup, Planning Division

More funding for constructing interpretive trails is available today than ever before. The timely passage of Propositions 12 (2000) and 40 (2002), along with government funding sources such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, National Recreational Trails Program, Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program, and the Habitat Conservation Fund continue to support these worthwhile park improvements.¹

So, now you have the funding for the trail, how do you put together the interpretive exhibits? Ideally, interpretive signs or exhibits offer stories that are designed to stimulate trail visitors' interest while challenging their imaginations, and perhaps present new perspectives on familiar topics. Through the use of interpretive signage, the trail presents themes that enable visitors to understand more clearly the messages of history, the environment, or a nearly forgotten culture. Jonathan Williams, an Interpretive Manager with California State Parks, describes the indisputable worth of an interpretive trail: "It draws in the visitor, captures a curiosity, develops an interest, and leaves the visitor with an undeniable sense of place and a little bit more knowledge than he or she had before."

Let's say you have just secured funding for a passive-use trail bordering a riparian habitat area. Where do you begin? How do you design an educational, yet engaging, interpretive exhibit for the trail? What are your subject areas? For example, when thinking of the area you want to interpret, try describing the:

- Cultural and historical significance to the area around the trail – a Native American presence like grinding rocks or other historic area of interests such as bridges or a nearby structure
- Animal life, such as the acorn woodpecker, golden beaver, butterflies, garter snake, field mice, bats, or problems with feral cats
- Vegetation along the trail, such as oaks, cottonwoods, native and non-native grasses
- Other natural conditions, such as seasonal variations, viewsheds, rocky outcrops
- Current day activities, such as nearby transportation routes and recreational uses
- Safety and preventive measures, such as poison oak, personal safety, swelling of the creek during the winter season, not feeding wildlife, and litter

Remember, trail visitors come in all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, and have an infinite range of interests and capabilities. School children, people with limited mobility, moms pushing strollers, bicycle riders, equestrians, joggers, walkers, and casual hikers – many speaking different languages – use interpretive trails. It's up to you as a park steward to instill a sense of appreciation for the story that needs to be told – interpretive theme and messages of the trail must be well planned.

The trail planner assesses the likely audience and the primary messages while keeping in mind the location and design of the trail. In addition, the planner determines the best sign design and location to relay the messages to the public, and also keeps in mind potentials for erosion, vandalism, visibility, public safety, and disruption of the viewshed. Complementary trail features such as well-placed benches, drinking fountains, or viewing decks help enrich the visitors' experiences and should be considered in the project-planning phase.

There are two primary types of interpretive trails. One is designed for visitors to travel at their own pace, reading panels, viewing exhibits or following the narrative in a brochure. The other is one that 'comes alive' with a docent or volunteer who offers opportunities for questions and answers. For example, volunteers lead interpretive walks on wildlife viewing along the American River Parkway in Sacramento County and at the living history program at Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park.

So where do you begin? Decide the primary 'theme' or story you want to present. An interpretive theme, according to Mr. Williams, "is like an array of chapters that relate to and make up the story you wish to tell. When taken together, they should add up to something similar to chapters in a book and be arranged in a logical sequence." In arriving at a theme statement, planners should attempt to provoke interest and to capture the essence of what is to be interpreted.

Imagine an interpretive trail located adjacent to an oak woodland. The topic is 'majestic oaks and their habitat'. The theme, 'Stately oaks provide a habitat rich in resources.' Therefore, the story you hope to tell might look something like this:

Valley Oak

The expansive branches of these stately trees may have shaded Spanish explorers and priests almost 230 years ago, much as they do for visitors today. Valley oaks (*Quercus lobata*) provided valuable food and shelter to the Native Americans whom relied heavily upon acorns as a staple for their winter diet. Oaks were held sacred by California Indians who held elaborate acorn ceremonies every fall. Oak acorns are high in fat and protein, making them an excellent source of nourishment for acorn woodpeckers, scrub jays, and squirrels. These animals in turn will help disperse the valley oak when they stash extra acorns for retrieval in winter months.

Valley Oak – an enduring reminder of lush woodlands of yesterday

The stately tall trees you see nearby are valley oaks (*Quercus lobata*). They were once part of extensive hardwood forests that lined the riverbanks of the Central Valley. Valley oaks thrive in fertile soils of flood planes where their roots are within reach of the water table. They grow to 100 feet, are deciduous (lose their leaves in winter), and are long-lived (they have been known to live 400-600 years), if conditions are right. These oaks are homes to many birds, squirrels, and insects. They cool the forest and streams, protect and nourish the soil, and provide lasting beauty for future generations.

Consider augmenting these text examples with an impression of an oak leaf, a drawing of an acorn, oak gall, or a sapling. Illustrations of riparian forest animals, such as golden beaver, California ground squirrel, common garter snake, cottontail, great blue heron, and river otter would help bring the language alive. Animal tracks, directional orientation and maps would be another terrific addition.

The Riparian Forest

These oaks are remnants of the Central Valley's once-mighty riparian forests, or streamside woodlands. Valley oaks and cottonwoods, with a dense understory of brambles and vines, cover the forests. They offer important habitat for a large variety of plants and animals and provide places to find food and shelter. Riparian forests also help filter water entering the streams, cool and shade rivers and creeks, and control soil erosion. At one time these forests often stretched over a mile wide on each side of large Central Valley rivers. Most have been lost as the land has been converted to other uses. Please be a good steward - help us protect these small forest remnants.

California State Parks has examples of interpretive signs in a catalog² available for you to review, but there are many local recreation and park agencies willing to share their research, text, or illustrations, as well.

A brief word on the trail itself – it can have many different surfaces – brick, wood planks (especially useful in beach areas), decomposed granite, asphalt or concrete. It can even be made of recycled tires, and vary in width and length. The American's with Disabilities Act web site is able to provide specific requirements for trail construction (www.usdoj.gov) or contact the Department's Statewide Trails Unit for assistance, www.parks.ca.gov.)

Your agency may consider the interpretive trail to be part of a larger, more complex transportation system or a short spur to tell the story of a valued natural resource. Whatever the length and design complexity, the interpretive signs can be a major or a minor feature; it's your choice. Signs can be in the form of 'V' shaped kiosks that have panels full of narrative, illustrations, and photographs or be as simple as a post with a number on it. Ask around – many local agencies have used a variety of materials, designs, and applications successfully. You'll learn a lot from their experiences and mistakes.

Trail Exhibits: Top Tips for Successful Trail Signs and Exhibits

1. Know your audience. Design exhibits that are intuitive, that engage the visitors in ways that encourage them to learn something new. The success of your project may hinge on identifying who is presently using the park, who is not, and who should be encouraged to come.
2. It is important to coordinate efforts on your interpretive exhibits. If you have documentation on the interpretive mission for your unit, use that as a starting point. If you have had the luxury of having an Interpretive Plan or Interpretive Prospectus, they will contain the Primary and Secondary Themes that should be included in your exhibit.

3. See the trail as your visitor would. Think about your trail from your guests' perspective. For example, if it's to be designed for schoolchildren, ask a nearby school administrator or teacher to help with the exhibit design and the educational messages.
4. People enjoy sequenced stories, not lectures. Use graphics and illustrations to relay the sequence of your theme.
5. Dangle a carrot - draw them in. Entice visitors from one area of the trail to another by creating 'visual magnets'. For example, begin a story on one panel and conclude it on another panel farther down the trail.
6. Use lots of eye-catching shapes and use readable fonts (remember ADA!). Illustrations may help represent a time period, a culture, spatial distances, a landscape, or an emotion – often capturing the imagination and explaining ideas without the use of words. Images selected for any interpretive project should engage visitors, fit thematically and not overwhelm the story or object. Note that certain images or the narrative itself may require the proper copyright clearances.
7. Avoid sensory overload. Resist the temptation to tell visitors too much. Visitors don't have to learn everything there is to know about a subject at that very moment. Try instead to stimulate people and provide guidance for those who want to pursue the topic further.
8. Tell one story at a time. According to Mr. Williams, "If you have a large amount of information to communicate, divide it into brief, well-organized stories. This allows people to understand and absorb one concept well before moving on to the next panel."
9. Relate a clear message. Educate your visitors by completing one thought before beginning another.
10. Make the message fun. Engage visitors with amusing questions and answers, nice-to-know tid-bits of information, or with memorable quotes.
11. Maintain the panels. If a panel becomes scratched or is no longer readable, it becomes nothing more than an eyesore. Change the panels periodically to retain the interest of frequent trail users.
12. Good interpretation always relates the message to the audience, communicating in a way that is both understandable and provocative. A range of interactive, touchable, and sensory interpretive facilities and programs can help to reinforce written or audible information for many visitors. Consider developing text in other languages, Braille, and use large text font, 18-point minimum.
13. Quality interpretive panels and exhibits can range in costs based on your chosen method of presentation. Contact interpretive service and commodity providers to get an estimate of costs prior to development of the trail plan.

Finally, be realistic about the amount of staff time, money, and other resources needed to create the signs for your trail. Mr. Williams recommends, "make a concerted effort to bring community members, such as volunteers or subject matter experts, into the design and review process." In the long run, this involvement can save time and money and may produce a better interpretive trail project to meet the needs of the community and visitors alike.

¹ For grant information, contact the California Department of Parks and Recreation, web site, www.parks.ca.gov

² For information about California State Parks panels, contact Jonathan Williams, jwill@parks.ca.gov or Don Amos at damos@parks.ca.gov

Links to related sites:

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation – www.achp.gov
American Association for State and Local History – www.aaslh.org
Association for Heritage Interpretation – www.heritage-interpretation.org.uk
Association for Living History, Farms and Agricultural Museums – www.Alhfam.org
The American Cultural Resources Association – www.acra-crm.org
Bureau of Land Management Environmental Education – www.blm.gov
California Council for the Promotion of History – www.csus.edu
California Historical Society – www.californiahistoricalsociety.org
California State Parks – www.parks.ca.gov (Statewide Trails Section, 916 653-6501 or the Office of Grants and Local Services, 916 653-8057)
EPA: Office of Environmental Education – www.epa.gov
Earthday Network – www.earthday.org
National Association for Interpretation – www.interpnet.com
National Park Service Cultural Resources Programs – www.cr.nps.gov/whatwedo.htm
National Science Foundation – www.nsf.gov
Rangers on the Web – www.rangersontheweb.com
Recreation Opportunities on Federal Lands – www.recreation.gov
Society of Architectural Historians – www.sah.org
Society for California Archaeology – <http://webmaster@scanet.org>
State Office of Historic Preservation – www.parks.ca.gov
This Old House – www.pbs.org/wgbh/thisoldhouse/home.html